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ABSTRACT

An assessment was conducted of an undergraduate psychology program at Santa Clara University (California) using satisfaction data from alumni, current undergraduates, and full-time psychology faculty. A survey was developed based on themes identified during structured focus groups with undergraduate psychology seniors and interviews with departmental professors. Surveys were completed by 153 alumni, 87 undergraduates, and 8 full-time professors within the department. Analysis indicated a strong consensus among alumni and current undergraduates that the quality of teaching was very strong in this department. Respondents perceived faculty as enthusiastic about psychology, talented in presenting information, current in the topics they taught, and appropriately challenging to students. Both alumni and students were less satisfied with the effectiveness of advising about careers and graduate education, opportunities to gain experience in applied settings, and opportunities to engage in research. Further analysis identified a discrepancy between what students expected of faculty and what faculty believed their jobs to be. Faculty saw their advising roles as providing information, whereas students wanted faculty advisors to provide broader support for students' career exploration activities. Specific recommendations regarding departmental communication, faculty involvement, student awareness, and student involvement are provided. Attached tables detail survey responses. (Contains 11 references.) (DB)

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Running head: PROGRAM EVALUATION

Evaluation of an Undergraduate Psychology Program: A Doable Department Response

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Santa Clara University

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Abstract

This article describes an assessment of an undergraduate psychology program. Through the utilization of various measurement instruments, satisfaction data was gathered from alumni, currently enrolled majors, and full-time faculty. The information requested focused on the participants' satisfaction with various aspects of the psychology department. Reasonable recommendations for departmental improvement in those areas with which respondents were less satisfied include: departmental communication, faculty involvement, student awareness, and student involvement.

Evaluation of an Undergraduate Psychology Program: A Doable Department Response

As the field of psychology evolves, demands for effectiveness studies, empirically supported methods, and accountability are becoming much more prevalent. Many institutions of higher education are now required to implement university-wide and or departmental assessments (Blumenstyk, 1988). The purpose of such assessments may be finding how well an institution or department meets the needs of the students as well as its success in providing a quality education that produces successful graduates. A growing number of researchers have begun investigating how the changes in psychology have impacted the academic, vocational, and personal goals of undergraduate psychology majors as well as determining how effective colleges and universities have been at meeting the diverse needs of students entering the field (Finney, Snell and Sebby, 1989; Keyes & Hogberg, 1990; McGovern, Furumoto, Halpern, Kimble, and McKeachie, 1991; Quereshi, 1988; Sheehan 1994, Sheehan & Granrud, 1995). An iinterest in undergraduate institutions' resiliency toward the changes that have occurred within the field of psychology has been spurred by recent issues such as the surge in undergraduate psychology majors (McDonald, 1997), the feminization of the field (Keyes & Hogberg, 1997; McDonald, 1997; Task Force on the Changing Gender Composition of Psychology, 1995), and the variety of employment opportunities available to recent graduates (Finney et al., 1989). As a result, institutions of higher education have begun initiating self-evaluations designed to assess their ability to provide a quality education and produce successful graduates (Blumenstyk, 1988; Sheehan, 1994).

Performing departmental evaluations is quite overwhelming with limited literature available to demonstrate how a department or institution should go about completing

such a task. In the past, those universities that do not have the resources to perform highly sophisticated evaluations or hire outside consultants have turned to surveying alumni and current undergraduates as a means of assessing the effectiveness of their undergraduate education in psychology (Keyes & Hogberg, 1990; Quershi, 1988; Sheehan & Granrud, 1995). Typically the information requested in these surveys includes the students' perception of the major's utility within the professional world, their satisfaction with the education they received, and their evaluation of the department's faculty and curriculum. This methodology, although fairly simplistic, has provided some interesting information regarding the challenges facing modern undergraduate education in psychology.

Several studies have revealed alumni and student dissatisfaction with the ability of the departments to provide the students with adequate guidance regarding careers and graduate school (Quereshi, 1988; Sheehan and Granrud, 1995). Finney et al. (1989) noted that there seems to be two major types of undergraduate psychology students: those with a high level of interest in pursuing graduate work, and those who wish to pursue a career immediately following graduation. In order to deal with this problem some institutions have developed separate undergraduate tracks for students interested in graduate school and for those focusing on applied careers (Finney, Snell & Shebby, 1989; McGovern & Hawks, 1984). A more pragmatic solution has been for departments to either increase their emphasis on career information and advising (Korn et al., 1996), or provide courses that will help familiarize students with various career opportunities available to psychology majors (Sheehan and Granrud, 1995). Although many department assessments, like those listed above, report areas of needed improvement, few

offer solution-based action plans in response to the evaluation outcomes (Korn, Sweetman, and Nodine, 1996).

In this study, we conducted an assessment of the Santa Clara University Undergraduate Psychology Program during 1997-1998. Satisfaction data was gathered from alumni, current undergraduates, and full-time psychology faculty. Provided are recommendations for improvement for this particular undergraduate psychology program.

Method

Participants

Surveys were mailed to 500 psychology alumni graduating between the years 1990-1997 and a modified version of the survey was distributed to 111 undergraduate psychology majors enrolled in upper-division psychology courses. Surveys used in the final analysis consisted of 153 alumni surveys (23 men, 129 women, 1 unreported) that were returned and 87 undergraduate surveys (12 males, 73 females, 2 unreported). Forty-three of the alumni participants volunteered to take part in telephone interviews. A brief survey was also administered to the 8 full-time professors within the psychology department.

Instruments and Procedure

Alumni Survey. Themes collected during structured focus groups with undergraduate psychology seniors, as well as interviews with professors in the department were influential in both the construction and final revisions of the alumni survey. The alumni survey consisted of three sections. The first section asked alumni to rate twelve aspects of their undergraduate education on a 7-point Likert scale. The issues surveyed included faculty, curriculum, professional opportunities, department resources, and

academic advising (see Table 1). The second section of the survey consisted of five open-ended questions regarding perceived departmental strengths, possible areas for improvement, experiences that were helpful for life after graduation, and further education pursued (see Table 4). The final section of the survey solicited various demographic characteristics including age, gender, ethnic background, year of graduation, and current occupation.

Alumni Telephone Interview. Alumni who where willing to participate in telephone interviews were questioned by the department evaluation team and students in an undergraduate course in psychological testing (see Table 6).

Undergraduate Survey. Undergraduate psychology majors who had completed at least two upper-division psychology courses were asked to fill out a slightly modified version of the alumni survey. The changes made to this survey focused largely on word tenses rather than content and the undergraduates' Likert ratings (see Table 2) and open-ended responses (see Table 5) were coded in the same manner described above.

Faculty Survey. Full-time professors in the psychology department were given a survey to assess the importance they assign to various aspects of teaching on a 10-point Likert scale (see Table 3). The issues surveyed revolved around class preparation, being up to date with research findings, advising, and various aspects of the faculty/student relationships.

Results

Alumni and Student Surveys

Descriptive statistics for each 7-point Likert scale question are provided in Table 1 for the alumni survey and in Table 2 for the undergraduate survey.

[Insert Tables 1 & 2 About Here]

Both alumni and undergraduates were most satisfied with the following aspects of the program: level of academic challenge provided by the professors, professors familiarity with current research, enthusiasm of the professors, professors ability to present information in a clear and interesting manner, and the opportunities to take classes in the major sub fields of psychology.

Undergraduate students were least satisfied with the department's ability to provide the following: opportunities for independent research, opportunities to gain experience in a variety of settings, effective advising, information regarding careers and graduate school, sufficient physical facilities, and an interest in student involvement with psychology-related activities outside the department. Alumni rated as least sufficient the department's ability to provide opportunities for independent research, accurate information regarding careers and graduate school, sufficient physical facilities, interest in student involvement with psychology-related activities outside the department, and opportunities to gain experience in applied settings.

Using t-tests, alumni and undergraduate quantitative ratings on the 7-point Likert scale statements were compared. While both groups rated the opportunities to acquire experiences in a variety of settings as the least satisfying aspect, the difference between alumni negative responses and those given by undergraduates was significant at the .05 level ($t=3.18$). Furthermore, the more recent graduates were less likely than later graduates to feel that the psychology department provided sufficient opportunities to acquire experiences in a variety of settings. ($r = -.21$ between year of graduation and item rating).

Faculty Surveys

Descriptive statistics for each 10-point Likert scale question assessing the importance assigned to various aspects of teaching reported by the faculty are provided in Table 3.

[Insert Table 3 About Here]

The faculty reported that the most important part of their position was to be aware of the latest findings in their area(s) of expertise, while helping students connect with psychology-related placements in the community was rated as least important.

Open-Ended Questions

Responses to the open-ended questions regarding strengths of the department, needed improvements, and experiences found most helpful for life after graduation were coded and tallied. The most frequent responses given by the alumni for each of the three categories are listed in Table 4 and the most frequent responses given by the undergraduates are listed in Table 5.

[Insert Tables 4 & 5 About Here]

The top two strengths given by both the alumni and undergraduates were faculty enthusiasm and the curriculum, while the top areas needing improvement were career and experience opportunities, curriculum, and some aspects of faculty.

Telephone Interviews

A sizeable majority of alumni participants in the telephone interviews reported that they would definitely choose to major in psychology again (88%, N = 38).

[Insert Table 6 About Here]

The top three reasons given for majoring in psychology were its versatility in the work force (32%, N = 13), the content of curriculum (22%, N = 9), and the enjoyment in learning about the field (20%, N = 8). Over two-thirds (63%, N = 27) of the respondents reported application to graduate school. Of these individuals, 70% (N = 19) felt the psychology program prepared them well for entrance into a graduate program, while 26% (N = 7) expressed negative feelings toward the psychology department's ability to sufficiently prepare them for graduate studies. The top four changes that the telephone participants suggested to improve the psychology department were to provide more information about careers (14%, N = 11) and graduate school (11%, N = 9), and offer more opportunities to perform independent research (11%, N = 9) and gain clinical experience (11%, N = 9).

Discussion

There is a strong consensus among alumni and current undergraduate students that the quality of teaching is very strong in this department. Respondents perceived that faculty are enthusiastic about psychology, talented in presented information in an interesting manner, current in the topics they teach, and appropriately challenging to students. Both alumni and students were less satisfied on average with the effectiveness of advising about careers and graduate education, opportunities to gain experience in applied settings, and opportunities to engage in their own research. But in counterpoint, a subset of respondents within both the alumni and student groups were highly satisfied with the mentoring and opportunities to "do psychology" that they experienced.

By putting the telephone interview clarifications together with the faculty interviews and surveys we were able to establish that an important discrepancy exists between what students expect of the faculty who teach and advise them in this psychology department –and, we suspect, in others – and what faculty believe their job is and is not. Faculty believes their obligation is to know their fields well, prepare and revise academically excellent classes and make these interesting, up to date, and stimulating of student learning. As advisors they believe they should be well informed about local requirements and prepared to answer students' questions about graduate study in psychology. Students, past and present, expect faculty to take a broader role in advising them. Students would like their major department to provide them with help in deciding how to direct their interest in applying psychology to their current and future experiences outside the classroom. They would like faculty advisors to help them learn about psychology-related careers, take an interest in their volunteer and paid work related to psychology, and direct them to community placements where they can explore psychology in action.

Recommendations for Improvement

The previously mentioned concerns among both alumni and undergraduate students were similar to those mentioned in several other departmental evaluations. In general, assessments have indicated that students would like to receive more information related to graduate school (Keyes & Hogberg, 1990; Sheehan & Granrud, 1995) and career planning (Korn et al., 1996; McGovern & Hawks, 1986; Sheehan & Granrud, 1995). Several studies have also noted that psychology majors express a desire to engage in psychology-related activities outside the department (Finney et al., 1989; Korn et al.,

1996) and participate in independent research projects (Korn et al., 1996; Sheehan & Granrud, 1994). The following are a few suggestions for dealing with the discrepancy, that is inclusive of many departments, between what students expect of the faculty who teach and advise them, and what faculty believe their job is and is not.

Departmental Communication

The first recommendation is to improve communication within the department. This increased communication between the students and the faculty can be achieved through an implementation of such things as a more detailed website, more issues of the departmental newsletter directed to students' concerns and the production of a yearly handbook. The website is proposed as an informative source for students, faculty and the community. It should include information such as faculty specialties, office hours, pictures, and current research projects. The website should be frequently updated with deadlines for such events as application to honor societies, announcements for the student Psychology club, and other events involving the students and faculty of the psychology department. This website should be accompanied by a newsletter that is mailed to students, and a handbook that contains information about courses, faculty research, service learning opportunities, preparation for graduate work, and career advising resources on campus.

Faculty Involvement

Our second recommendation is to increase faculty involvement with the students in the area of advising and connecting the students with the community. Undergraduate students were least satisfied with the advising they were receiving. Advising could be more effective, informative and time efficient for the students and faculty if the faculty were to have advising workshops as part of their regular meetings. People from other areas of campus, who provide services that students want, can present their programs during these workshops.

Currently, the faculty believes that helping students connect with psychology-related placements in the community is the least important aspect of their job. Students surveyed perceived that there were insufficient opportunities to pursue both independent research and psychology related interests in outside placements. In interviews and on open-ended questions, students expressed doubt that faculty were interested in their involvement. It is important to acknowledge the needs and wants of the students for learning opportunities beyond the classroom. Our suggestions are aimed at integrating informational resources and encourage the use of them in advising with regular faculty activities.

Student Awareness

The third recommendation is to increase student awareness of existing resources. If the department brings in the university's Career Services and representatives of graduate programs to participate in student events in the department, student awareness of these resources will increase. We need to introduce these resources to our department,

which is where students are seeking them, and not finding them; an experience they interpret as indicating faculty disinterest. If career and graduate advising resources are brought to the department, publicity about them will be distributed by faculty in classes, which will enhance the perceived connection between classroom and out of classroom learning.

Student Involvement

Our last recommendation is to increase student involvement in the department's advising and other activities. A structured program of peer advising would prove to be more effective than the more informal models often attempted. A more difficult but achievable objective for increasing student involvement is to change the typical psychology student's passive approach to an active one of seeking the developmental opportunities they need. Peer leaders could conduct a series of "focus groups" about how to get involved in the department during classes to start the ball rolling for attitude change.

Our survey study of alumni and student satisfaction was completed to meet institutional requirements that are commonplace. The creation of reasonable responses to the findings from such assessments poses a challenge to most departments. We believe that simple steps to integrate existing campus resources and department activities, along with improved communication, will enable most departments to address student concerns without dramatically changing faculty job descriptions. Furthermore, the specific measures for improvement utilized in this study could realistically be carried out within any department.

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Table 1

Summary of Alumni Responses

Question	M	SD	Median	No Opinion (%)	Negative (%)	Neutral (%)	Positive (%)
1. Professors were familiar with current findings and ideas	5.68	1.08	6.00	1	3	8	88
2. Received effective advising	5.38	1.79	6.00	2	16	7	75
3. Professors gave accurate information regarding careers and graduate schools	4.66	1.71	5.00	18	18	20	44
4. Professors provided opportunities for independent research	4.94	1.83	5.00	13	20	14	53
5. Psychology department provided opportunities to acquire experiences in a variety of settings	4.11	1.86	4.00	14	31	18	37
6. Professors provided appropriate levels of academic challenge	5.86	1.07	6.00		5	4	91

Table 1 (continued).

Question	M	SD	Median	No Opinion (%)	Negative (%)	Neutral (%)	Positive (%)
7. Department offered adequate opportunities to take classes in the major subfields of psychology	5.61	1.37	6.00	2	8	11	79
8. Professors presented information in clear/interesting manner	5.51	1.24	6.00		6	14	80
9. Physical facilities used by the department were sufficient	4.64	1.60	5.00	3	22	20	55
10. Professors showed enthusiasm for teaching and learning	5.81	1.15	6.00		5	9	86
11. The number of faculty seemed adequate	4.98	1.44	5.00	1	16	14	69
12. Professors showed interest in student involvement in psychology-related activities outside the department	4.69	1.65	5.00	16	17	20	47

Note. Responses were made on a 7 point scale where 1 = strongly disagree, and 7 = strongly agree. Scores of 3 and below were considered generally negative and scores of 5 and above were considered generally positive. Scores of 4 were considered neutral.

Table 2

Summary of Psychology Undergraduates Responses

Question	M	SD	Median	No Opinion (%)	Negative (%)	Neutral (%)	Positive (%)
1. Professors are familiar with current findings and ideas	5.85	0.72	6.00	6		3	91
2. Receive effective advising	4.15	1.87	4.00	7	36	15	42
3. Professors give accurate information regarding careers and graduate schools	4.15	1.51	5.00	21	22	16	41
4. Professors provide opportunities for independent research	4.05	1.90	4.00	23	32	15	30
5. Psychology department provides opportunities to acquire experiences in a variety of settings	3.19	1.58	3.00	14	50	20	16
6. Professors provide appropriate levels of academic challenge	5.58	1.05	6.00		3	8	89

Table 2 (continued).

Question	M	SD	Median	No Opinion (%)	Negative (%)	Neutral (%)	Positive (%)
7. Department offers adequate opportunities to take classes in the major subfields of psychology	5.26	1.50	6.00	1	14	13	78
8. Professors present information in clear/interesting manner	5.25	1.23	5.00	1	14	11	74
9. Physical facilities used by the department are sufficient	4.45	1.60	4.00	14	22	25	39
10. Professors show enthusiasm for teaching and learning	5.51	1.14	6.00		3	16	81
11. The number of faculty seems adequate	4.74	1.49	5.00	2	24	17	57
12. Professors show interest in student involvement in psychology-related activities outside the department	4.32	1.47	4.00	18	29	14	39

Note. Responses were made on a 7 point scale where 1 = strongly disagree, and 7 = strongly agree. Scores of 3 and below were considered generally negative and scores of 5 and above were considered generally positive. Scores of 4 were considered neutral.

Table 3

Summary of Professors Responses

Question – How Important is it for Psychology Professors to:	M	SD	Median
1. Be up to date in subjects taught	8.50	3.12	10.00
2. Be well prepared and organized for class	8.88	3.18	10.00
3. Engage students in discussion during class-time	7.50	2.07	8.00
4. Engage students in discussion outside of class	5.88	1.55	6.00
5. Advise students well about academic requirements	7.75	2.19	8.00
6. Advise students well about future careers	7.55	2.38	8.50
7. Help students connect with places in community that apply psychology	6.50	1.77	6.50
8. Provide students with opportunities in research activities	7.88	2.70	9.00
9. Maintain a good student/faculty relationship	8.50	2.67	9.00

Note. Responses were made on a 10 point scale where 1 = not important at all, and 10 = very important. Scores of 5 and below were considered generally negative and scores of 6 and above were considered generally positive.

Table 4

Most Frequent Alumni Responses Given to Open-Ended Questions

	Strengths of the Department[a]	% Mentioning
1.	Enthusiastic Faculty (knowledge, advising, student relationship)	78
2.	Courses and Curriculum (range courses and times offered)	48
3.	Opportunities (research, Eastside, internships)	22
4.	Class Size	17
5.	Other	6

	Needed Improvements[b]	% Mentioning
1.	Career and Experience Opportunities (research, career fairs, internships)	42
2.	Curriculum (books, courses, tests, materials)	40
3.	Faculty (lectures, advising, relations with students, faculty diversity)	36
4.	Resources (computers, buildings, facilities, rooms, labs)	14
5.	Other	7
6.	Student Groups (SCUPS)	6

	Experiences Found Most Helpful for Life After Graduation[c]	% Mentioning
1.	General Education	62
2.	Placement (off-site, Eastside, internships)	21
3.	Research (outside of curriculum)	19
4.	Faculty / Student relationship	17
5.	Little or Nothing	4
6.	Other	4

Note.

[a] 7% of participants did not respond to this question.

[b] 16% of participants did not respond to this question.

[c] 12% of participants did not respond to this question.

Table 5

Most Frequent Undergraduate Responses Given to Open-Ended Questions

	Strengths of the Department[a]	% Mentioning
1.	Enthusiastic Faculty (knowledge, advising, student relationship)	82
2.	Courses and Curriculum (range courses and times offered)	38

	Needed Improvements[b]	% Mentioning
1.	Curriculum (books, courses, tests, materials)	51
2.	Faculty (lectures, advising, relations with students, faculty diversity)	43
3.	Career and Experience Opportunities (research, career fairs, internships)	32

	Experiences Found Most Helpful for Life After Graduation[c]	% Mentioning
1.	General Education	41
2.	Placement (off-site, Eastside, internships)	29
3.	Research (outside of curriculum)	20

Note.

[a] 15% of participants did not respond to this question.

[b] 14% of participants did not respond to this question.

[c] 44% of participants did not respond to this question.

Table 6

Most Frequent Responses Given to Telephone Interview Questions

Question	% Yes (N)	% No (N)	% Not Sure (N)
1. If you had to do it again, would you choose psychology as your major? Why or why not?[a]	88 (38)	10 (4)	5 (2)
Of the 88% (N = 38) respondents who replied "yes":			Top three reasons given were[b]:
Good foundation to multiple fields			32% (N = 13)
Content of curriculum			22% (N = 9)
Enjoyment			20% (N = 8)

Note.

[a] One respondent responded, "yes" and "no". Hence, the total is 103%.

[b] Some respondents had more than one reason, whereas some had no reason. There was a total of 41 reasons given and they were broken down into 7 categories.

Table 6 (continued).

Question	% Yes (N)	% No (N)
2. Did you apply to graduate school?	27 (63)	37 (16)
If yes, how well did the psychology program and faculty prepare you for choosing and gaining entrance into a graduate school program?		
Of the 63% (N = 27) respondents who did apply to graduate school, opinions on how well the psychology program prepared them were divided into either a positive or negative view[c]:	% Positive (N)	% Negative (N)
	70 (19)	26 (7)

3. What you would like to see changed in the psychology program? What would have been more valuable to you?

Of the 80 responses given by the 43 alumni:	The top four responses were:
More information about careers	14% (N = 11)
More information about graduate school as an option	11% (N = 9)
More opportunity to do independent research	11% (N = 9)
More clinical experience	11% (N = 9)

[c] One respondent did not offer a view on whether or not the psychology program prepared her or not.